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STATE FOR NEA/MAG; USUN FOR AMBASSADOR BOLTON

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TAGS: [MO](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: AMBASSADOR PRESSES FOR CREDIBLE AUTONOMY PLAN AND BROADER DEBATE

REF: A. STATE 60280
[1](#)B. RABAT 714

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with Deputy FM Taieb Fassi Fihri for two hours the afternoon of April 17 to deliver points on the possible visit of Hamas SecGen Mishal (Refs A and B). Most of the meeting was consumed by a discussion on the Western Sahara, however, as Fassi Fihri recapped his recent meetings in Washington and subsequent visits to Moscow and Beijing to lobby for support for Morocco's position on the Sahara. In typical fashion he accused the Algerians of moving the goalposts for improved relations with Morocco, highlighting a series of statements by Algerian officials indicating that improved relations and the opening of the border depend on Morocco's implementation of the Baker Plan. The Ambassador said the US was disappointed the GOM had come to Washington empty-handed, after indicating it was prepared to share specific ideas on autonomy. The Ambassador also challenged Fassi Fihri on the consultation process underway in Morocco on autonomy, saying it was unconvincing, and he pressed Morocco to stimulate genuine debate on the issue. Fassi Fihri appeared to delay even further the possible submission of an autonomy plan, saying the consultation process could take a year or more, and even hinting nothing would be ready prior to the 2007 parliamentary elections.
End Summary.

Algerians Being Provocative

[¶](#)2. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by Polcouns, met with Deputy FM Fassi Fihri late afternoon April 17 to deliver Ref A points on the possible visit of Hamas SecGen Khalid Mishal (Ref B). Fassi Fihri was accompanied by MFA Bilateral Affairs Director Youssef Amrani and Chef du Cabinet Abdelmounaim el Farouq. Most of the two-hour discussion focused on the Western Sahara issue. Ambassador asked for Fassi Fihri's views on his March meetings in Washington and his travels to other Security Council capitals. Fassi Fihri said he had visited Paris, London, Moscow, and Beijing. Before elaborating on what he encountered there, however, Fassi Fihri opened a folder of documents -- recent statements made by Algerian officials -- and proceeded to read directly

from them. He opened by noting that in Washington -- on advice of the US embassy -- he had not spent a lot of time in his discussions with USG complaining about Algeria. "We were not very aggressive about Algeria," he said. He and PermRep Sahel went to Washington to be constructive. It was in that vein that the King had written recently to President Bush. But he wanted the Ambassador to be clear about the statements and position adopted by the Algerians toward Morocco since UN Envoy Van Walsum's January 18 briefing of the Security Council -- as evidenced by Algerian President Bouteflika's letter to UNSYG Annan and statements made by the Algerian cabinet.

¶13. (C) Algeria's insistence that it is not a party to the conflict, but can play a helpful role, "provokes people in Morocco," Fassi Fihri said. All Moroccans believe the key to the conflict is in Algiers. Especially galling, Fassi Fihri said, were PM Ouyahia's comments to the effect that the re-opening of the border is tied with a resolution of the Western Sahara conflict (which in turn hinges on implementation of the Baker Plan, he added). So the Algerian position was first Morocco's need to respect international legality, then the two countries can talk about normalization. Fassi Fihri said the Algerian Press Service did not cover all of the PM's comments, but he had a transcript of what was actually said. Former FM Belkhadem had said recently the opening of the borders is not possible in the absence of a resolution of the Western Sahara. In Washington, FM Bedjaoui said (according to Fassi Fihri) that the Americans know very well there are parties to the conflict: Morocco and the Polisario; Algeria can help, along with Spain, Mauritania, and the US, as "a friend of the two parties." And Algerian Army Chief of Staff Ahmed Saleh was in Washington this week; during a recent visit to Moscow, he

had said, "We want to fight and win, just like the Russians."

Recapping Washington Visit

¶14. (C) In Washington, Fassi Fihri continued, we heard "new things" in meetings with USG officials. Opening another folder and leafing through hand-written notes drafted by Sahel, Mekouar, and himself following their meetings, notes he joked that he had not even shared with his secretary, he asked Polcouns to set aside his pen, as this was just personal. Fassi Fihri said A/S Welch had welcomed Sahel and him in a very warm manner, emphasizing the strength and strategic nature of the US-Morocco relationship and the important leadership of the King; conveying that the US agreed that autonomy was the way forward for the Western Sahara and self-determination could be accommodated in several different ways; and suggesting that Morocco's position on the issue was stronger than Algeria's (sic). Deputy Secretary Zoellick, whom Fassi Fihri knew well from the FTA negotiations, was very congenial, Fassi Fihri said, and stressed that autonomy had to be real, and there had to be a serious negotiation. NSC Deputy Abrams, Fassi Fihri said, had focused on a Moroccan diplomatic timeline, and had relayed that Russia and China, along with others in the Arab world, were eager to play a role.

¶15. (C) What was new from the USG, Fassi Fihri said, "something I have not heard in 12 years," was the idea that a serious dialogue with the Polisario had to get underway before the US could extend full support to Morocco. This was conveyed to the Moroccans as an American suggestion, not a condition, Fassi Fihri said, adding that A/S Welch and others were "tough diplomats." He was also struck by the use of the term "mystical" by USG officials to describe Morocco's thinking on autonomy.

Russian, Chinese Views on Western Sahara

¶16. (C) Continuing his global tour, Fassi Fihri said the US and P-4 had urged Morocco to "do its homework" in terms of

broad consultations on autonomy, and it was in that spirit that Fassi Fihri had traveled to P-5 capitals. He believed the P-5 understood that what Morocco was considering on autonomy was different from the past. Morocco was going to disseminate another autonomy plan. Fassi Fihri had traveled to Moscow and Beijing in late 2003 to share the first autonomy plan. Because the next plan would be widely publicized, it needed the support of the Moroccan people as well as the Security Council. The P-5 all have embassies in Rabat and are to a varying extent in touch with the political parties in Morocco.

¶ 17. (C) In Moscow, Fassi Fihri said, the Russians expressed support for a political solution to the Western Sahara and never mentioned the Polisario. In the past the GOR had offered to the UN to mediate between Morocco and Algeria, something the Algerians refused. The Chinese view the conflict as pitting against each other two countries friendly to China; the Chinese also favor a negotiated solution acceptable to all parties. (Note: Chinese President Hu Jintao will visit Morocco April 24-26).

Path to Autonomy is Irreversible

¶ 18. (C) Ambassador asked Fassi Fihri about the possibility of an international conference on the Western Sahara. Depending on the circumstances, would Morocco attend? Fassi Fihri said the Algerians want a conference that brings together Morocco and the Polisario and that allows Algeria to stay on the sidelines and portray itself as a "good guy with no historical responsibility." Fassi Fihri asserted that Morocco was not against dialogue with the Polisario. There had been dialogue in the past, and a Moroccan weekly magazine had even carried a front-page story on the dialogue. The King's call to political parties and the Moroccan people to work together on an autonomy plan creates an irreversibility. It is not a tactic. Morocco would present something to negotiate with the Polisario. But the US and the international community could not provide comfort to Algeria that it was not a party to the dispute. The international community makes a mistake if it allows Algeria to distance itself from the conflict.

¶ 19. (C) As to timing, Fassi Fihri said the consultation process with the political parties, now well underway, would take a minimum of six months. The consultation with "the people" could take twelve months, maybe more.

Morocco's About Face: Why?

¶ 10. (C) Ambassador said the US expected that Fassi Fihri would present in Washington some elements of an autonomy proposal, based on previous discussions with the Ambassador. The US expected something concrete, based on what the GOM had said. Fassi Fihri said Morocco was taking a page from America's own book -- like the Millennium Challenge Corporation -- and promoting a genuine discussion on autonomy. That takes time, he insisted. The Ambassador said he had spent much of the last week meeting with Morocco's leading political parties; none had any real details to share about their thinking on autonomy. The US was disappointed that no plan, or no outline of one, was shared with the US in Washington.

CORCAS

¶ 11. (C) Turning to the Royal Advisory Council for Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS), the Ambassador relayed that the head of the RNI party, Ahmed Osman, had met with a delegation of Sahrawis upset at having been excluded from CORCAS. Osman had reportedly tried to arrange a meeting for the delegation with the King, per their request, to no avail. Should CORCAS not cast its net wide to encompass a variety of points of view, the Ambassador asked. The impression we had was that CORCAS

was limited; it included former members of the Polisario and others, but did anyone who does not support autonomy have a voice in CORCAS? The Ambassador also questioned the decision to hold the first meeting of CORCAS in Rabat; that was a "bad symbol," he said. For the US to support Morocco on autonomy, Morocco needed a real consultation mechanism; Morocco needed to stimulate real debate, not just produce a council that would rubber stamp decisions made elsewhere.

¶12. (C) Fassi Fihri said he heard the Ambassador was not impressed with CORCAS. He insisted that there would be genuine debate. The US needed to understand how far CORCAS had come from its earlier incarnation. The council was first created in 1981 and was composed solely of tribal leaders. When King Mohammed took the throne, he asked then-PM Youssoufi to reinvigorate the council. He asked for wide representation. There are people in the Sahara who argue they cannot participate in such a mechanism if their father is not represented. There are tribal customs, Fassi Fihri said, even if they are evolving. Just as he had done with the family code and the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, the King had made an enormous effort to push CORCAS forward. Former MOI Driss Basri froze the council in Hassan II's time. King Mohammed endowed the council with an economic purpose as well -- to advise on the development of the region. The Sahara, after all, is poor. In spite of the King's call, no one succeeded in dynamizing the Sahrawi council. He had to step in directly. There were three women in the previous council; now the council was representative and had special inclusion of women and youth. Many Sahrawis are complaining they are left out, but the council cannot include everyone directly. Fassi Fihri said he did not think the US appreciated the effort behind CORCAS. CORCAS could not accept people who wave the Polisario flag. No individual who supports the Polisario represents people in the Sahara. Apart from that, the door is still open to membership.

¶13. (C) Fassi Fihri said the council met in Rabat because it is a royal council, and it reports to the King, like other royal councils. To hold the first meeting in Laayoune would be destabilizing. Morocco does not do that with other royal councils. The Rif area in the northern Morocco would make a similar demand if CORCAS opened in the Sahara. All members of CORCAS are advisors to the King. That is their role. CORCAS represents all tendencies, from revolutionary to conservative. CORCAS was not only charged to deal with autonomy; it had a social and cultural role to play as well. If in the end the political parties proposed and accepted ideas on autonomy, it was not an accident, not something automatic. There was an evolution underway, and the US should welcome it.

¶14. (C) The Ambassador said he did not need to be convinced of the objectives of CORCAS or indeed the GOM overall. The more the US could see a real debate, the more supportive the US could be on the outcome. Could anyone attend a CORCAS meeting? Was there a way for CORCAS to interact with the Polisario or with the UN? There was a real window of opportunity here, the Ambassador stressed, a great chance to push forward with autonomy. But one does not get the feeling of open debate. Even the names of the CORCAS members ran together as one long list, with individuals indistinguishable. The US needs something tangible to support. The more the debate and process were real, the less they appeared artificial, the stronger Morocco's case was. Fassi Fihri said the King had imposed no limits on CORCAS. The Ambassador stressed the US expected a credible autonomy plan from Morocco. Everyone does, he added. Fassi Fihri insisted CORCAS and the way forward could not be more transparent or credible. King Mohammed had been courageous to get things this far. The debate in the coming months will be intensive, Fassi Fihri promised. The King has not proposed any particular plan for autonomy.

¶15. (C) At the door on the way out, Fassi Fihri noted that Sahel had told him (Sahel called three times during the meeting; Fassi Fihri took the third call and left the room

for several minutes to converse) that the UNSYG's report would call on the parties to negotiate. Fassi Fihri reiterated his earlier point about Moroccan willingness to negotiate with the Polisario but advised that Algeria could remain a by-stander. He also said that with the 2007 parliamentary elections coming up, Morocco had to be careful that its autonomy plan could not be exploited by certain political parties, implying that the timing of an autonomy plan could be affected by the lead-up to the elections.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Riley